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ABSTRACT

Students tend to think of writing as reporting the topography of their minds and souls guided by the assumptions that reality is "out there," that reality is relatively unproblematical, that the concepts they use are common to everyone and are therefore self-evident, and that they should and can abstract themselves from the processes of the worlds they write about. The teacher wants the students to conceive of a writer as a process within a process engaging in a process. A metaphor that helps define the role a teacher can play to achieve that is Teacher-as-Artist who deliberately creates disorder by disorienting the audience. However, teaching within that metaphor is likely to create considerable anxiety among students. This anxiety can be reduced by making the classroom into a playground where students can rehearse failure in a protected situation. Some techniques to help create this atmosphere include using group work as much as possible, stopping the use of syllabi, digressing a great deal, avoiding the assignment of one-shot papers, reading student journals and asking questions that lead to another entry, and assigning papers that grow out of each other. (TJ)

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The Classroom As Playground

This is the third straight year I've attended the 4 C's convention, and I find that I still enjoy it. And I think the thing I really like about this particular convention is that it is a playground, and no matter what happens when I return home to the 75 student papers I left scattered on my desk, I will somehow be better off for having gone through the process of being here for a few days. This is our recess, our play-time, a time when we can fool around with ideas for awhile, be optimistic, reaffirm old half-forgotten beliefs and test out some new ones, argue for the sheer pleasure of arguing--all-in-all, heating up our theoretical and pedagogical cores to the point of meltdown and beyond.

Here, anyway, we can even deal in the Big Picture; that is, we can try to locate our own place in the scheme of things--certainly in the educational process our students go through, maybe even in the capital "S" Society whose best interests we try to serve no matter how it might complain. So here's the Big Picture--or one of them, anyway: "Means-oriented societies, for whom the game is the game. Ends-oriented societies, for whom the game is winning. In the first, if one is happy, then one is successful; in the second, one cannot be happy unless one is successful. The whole tendency of evolution and history suggests that man must become means-oriented if he is to survive." That's a quotation--I wouldn't dare say it myself, not even here. It's from John Fowles The Aristos, and I'll get back to it.

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But first to business. Bob Root has just suggested to us that when we design a composition course and create a classroom persona, we should make sure that our moves are derived from, and consistent with, sane and humane definitions of two basic concepts: "learning" and "the writing student." Those are two of our basics, our true basics, because they are our bases. Since I am at least a part-time rhetorician, and therefore deal compulsively in triangles, I want to dwell a moment on a third basic concept--"writing"--and discuss how my sense of the writing process--what it involves, what it's good for--almost logically leads me to some ideas both about what I should ask my students to do in my course, and also about the conditions I should try to create for them to do it in.

I should also point out that when I make my day-to-day decisions as a comp teacher, I am also influenced by a belief that my students' ideas are different from mine: not only their concept of the writing process, but also their related concepts of both the world they write about and of the self-that-writes. I also believe--and this may be where assumption becomes teacherly presumption--I also believe that my ideas are somehow better than theirs: lead to better things, better people. So, knowing that my students' writing performance is to some degree informed by their very concept of the activity itself, what I try to do in the classroom is often designed to alter their concept of "writing."

I think I know what most of my students think writing is--besides hard work to be avoided, that is. They think it's reporting.

Or to use a metaphor developed several years ago by Walker Gibson: mapmaking--that is, a rather impersonal and informational exposing of the world to the reader, a telling it like it is. Even when they venture into their own subjective world, attended by "I think," "I feel," and "I _really_ feel," I get the sense that they still see themselves as attempting to _report_ the topography of their minds and souls. Most of my students, that is, conceive of themselves as _cameras_ when they write, not photographers--much less painters or sculptors (which is what _I_ would like). Or if they _do_ conceive of themselves as photographers--and of writing as photography--they seem to believe that they are limited to using Kodak Instamatics and getting their snapshots processed through a local drugstore. They don't know yet about Minolta SLR's (_non_-electronic, mind you), nor about developing prints in a personal darkroom.

_As_ reporters and snapshooters, my students are unconsciously guided--_controlled_, probably--by certain Reporter's assumptions. I'll mention four of the bigees in a moment, but first let me give you a quick laundry list of the writing problems which I think _derive_ from those assumptions: Disembodied concepts, intelligible but not-always-intelligent abstractness, unnoticed and unexplained evaluations, simplistic either-or, all-or-nothing formulations, and a lack of self-consciousness about the _persona_ created in any piece of writing. These, I think, are _major_ writing problems, and no drill instructor can save us from the battle fatigue they cause. They are matters of _morals_ more than manners.

Now: here's a list of the Reporter's assumptions which I think generate these major problems in my students' writing. First is their persistent belief that "Reality" is "out there," largely independent of the writer and certainly independent of a writer's linguistic operations. "Reality," that is, is the kind of thing which can be reported, and if it ever proves troublesome to do so, that's a reflection of the writer's poor reporting skills, not a hint that what we call "Reality" is an interaction between perceiver and perceived. Second (and obviously related), is their belief that the "Reality" they write about is relatively unproblematical--it lends itself, if one only knows the trick, to fairly simple recording. Third, is their belief that the words, the concepts, they use to record the world are common to everyone and therefore self-evident in meaning--they, too, lend themselves well to reporting. Fourth, and perhaps most disturbing of all, perhaps the root of the other misguiding assumptions, is their belief that they not only should but can abstract themselves from the processes of the worlds they write about. That is, few of my students have developed the kind of deep self-consciousness which would allow them to understand all of what Percy Bridgman meant when he said, "The brain that tries to understand is itself a part of the world that it is trying to understand."

Since my students operate with these Reporter's assumptions what they would like to believe--and often seem to believe--is that writing well is some kind of trick: complicated at first, perhaps (like putting together a Chinese block puzzle), but not all

that mysterious once you know the drill, the procedures, the rules--or, to use language found in modern rhetorics: the "method" or "pattern" or "system." And they look to me for the answer to the puzzle. In a dozen ways they ask me, "What's the right way to say this?" No assignment sheet is too long for them--they pore over the ones I give them looking for clues as to what exactly I want them to say and how exactly I want them to say it. They make doctrines out of suggestions. I think that in a lot of ways they like Drill Instructors, like Order-Givers, for order-givers do just that--give them some order. They are rule-mongers, really--they like rules, are comfortable with them, for rules fit into their concept of what writing is. They would like to believe that to write well one needs only know the rules and follow the drill.

But I don't want them to believe any of that. What I want them to believe--what I want to help them believe (eventually, as they evolve and when they are ready)--is that the worlds they write about are active processes, not static "somethings" which can be reported more or less accurately. I want them to believe what Buckminster Fuller believed when he said, "We all speak and think of things when no things exist--all is dynamic interaction." I'd also like my students to understand that they are themselves a part of that interaction Fuller speaks of--and stop believing they can abstract themselves from the processes they write about. Furthermore, I want them to eventually see that when they write, their writing is that interaction, inescapably interpretive and creative. (They intuitively understood that once, back when they were learning how to use language

for the first time, and I want them to understand it again--consciously this time.)

Finally, I want my students to begin seeing themselves as processes--to conceive of the self, as Michael Oakeshott puts it, "as activity...not a 'thing' or 'substance' capable of being active."

Well now, let's see: If my students come to believe all that, they will come to conceive of a writer as a process within a process engaging in a process. That certainly defines a process-orientation. It also defines, I think, intelligence, maturity and humility. To put it grandly, it is an orientation--a way of seeing one's self and one's world and one's writing--which makes good writing possible.

All of this should lead, of course, to some ideas about what roles you and I ought to play in the composition classroom, about what metaphor of ourselves we want to extend to its inevitable breaking point. Bob has rejected some of the conventional models and offered his alternatives. Whatever metaphor we choose, it should be one that is at least as process-oriented as the model of the good writer we want our students to evolve towards. I have my own favorite. It's one that goes back a ways, so it might be familiar to you. It's also one I have to keep repeating to myself because of increasing pressure to discard it. (It was just a month or so ago that one of my colleagues, flak-jacket turned inside-out, admonished me: "Times are changing, John; this isn't the 60's anymore.")

The metaphor is Teacher-as-Artist. I think it's a little different from Bob's Teacher-as-Artisan. I gathered the metaphor several years ago from Morse Peckham's Man's Rage for Chaos, a book about art and artists and everything else. In that book Peckham claims that the major function of art is not (as conventionally assumed by our students) to create order, but rather to create dis-order. The function of the artist, therefore, is to deliberately disorient his audience, to offer problems--but not problems to be solved, exactly. In Peckham's words, the artist "simply presents the unpredicted; he offers the experience of disorientation." He is far more concerned with giving his audience an "awareness of the gap between behavioral pattern and environmental demand" than with "closing the gap." The effect on the audience is, as Peckham sees it, two-fold: "His first response is disorientation; his mode of prediction in this situation has failed. He experiences a profound emotional disturbance... The next activity is to renew searching behavior, which is the norm of all oriented human perceptual activity; in other words, to reorient himself."

I could go on with this, but I'm sure it's familiar enough to you by now. Bob discussed this disorientation-reorientation process when he talked earlier about Frank Smith. Piaget and Joseph Church discuss the process at length when they talk about how and when children learn. Kenneth Boulding's The Image focusses on the process in grown-ups. Translating it into the terms of our particular fields--rhetoric and college composition--we come up with the concept of "Starting Point," an idea Richard Young discussed at length

last summer at the University of Detroit Rhetoric Seminar. As defined by Young, the starting point of interesting and mature writing is a sense of exigency, of congruity, of dissonance--that is, a combination of the recognition by the writer that a problem exists and the presence of some desire to solve it. Young also pointed out that, though many rhetoric texts now provide single or multiple heuristics to help a student explore problems thoroughly, these texts don't have a section which helps that student discover the problems themselves. Instead, these texts assume that the Starting Point is a given.

Well,it's seldom a given, of course. As you've noticed, many of our students truly don't think they have anything interesting to write about. That's not surprising, for as I implied earlier, our students do not come to us in a state of chaos. Nor does their experience come to them in a chaotic blizzard. Rather, their conceptual frameworks (call them "cognitive structures," "categorial systems," "schemes," ideas," or "points of view" if you wish) protect them--as ours protect us--from any great sense of disorderliness--and therefore from any great sense of exigency, of urgency. The problem with their writing is seldom that it is disorderly--not in any deep way. Rather, a major problem is that it isn't all that interesting (not to us; probably not to them). It tends to reflect ways of looking at the world which--to us, at least--are just a little too simple, too set, too settled.

Of course, if we play the Artist role when we teach our comp courses, what we try to do--consistently--is to unsettle our students, so they will have something to write about--and want to write about. That is, we try to create the desired exigency by offering them not just one Starting Point (perhaps we should call them "restarting points"), but

many--and all along the way. Our oral and marginalia comments become mini-heuristics for re-visioning their subject. We force them, that is, out of what Peckham calls the "audience role"--marked by habitual and compulsive behavior, by unquestioned conventionality--and into the "critic" role: one marked by the sense of dissonance which comes from suddenly recognizing that the audience role was being played, and that it was inadequate.

My wife mentioned to me a couple of days ago that Donald Graves is doing research on 2nd-grade writers, and has discovered that the spirit of revision doesn't really take hold until a kid stops erasing and starts crossing out. Now that makes sense to me. We can still see what we cross out; we don't give it up completely, not all at once. Nor do we want to. Nor should we, probably. Anyway, I think that's what the Teacher-as-Artist does: he constantly asks his students to cross out, but not erase.

So let's look at this Teacher-as-Artist metaphor in terms of the 3 basics I mentioned earlier. First, is this notion consistent with a sane concept of "learning"? Well, it seems o.k. on that score, anyway. The Teacher-as-Artist asks the students to modify their so-called "conceptual structures," but doesn't ask them to learn anything they can't learn. Second, is this metaphor in line with a humane concept of "the writing student"? A possible problem here, for it is true that by continually disorienting his students the Teacher-as-Artist--like any teacher, really--suggests to them that they are somehow deficient. But that's fine. Who isn't? More important, by refusing to reorient his students by answering how own questions--and that's a trick, as you know--the same Teacher-as-Artist implies to them that they are quite capable of handling the reorientation part them-

selves.

Finally, what concept of "language," or "writing," operates when the Teacher-as-Artist operates? Well, it seems to me that the composition teacher who plays the role of the disrupting artist actually dramatizes a belief that language-activity is, as Oakeshott calls it, "conversable," made for conversation, for in conversation "facts appear to be resolved once more into the possibilities from which they were made," and "certainties are shown to be combustible. . ." By his own example, then, the Teacher-as-Artist encourages students to see writing as he sees it; open-ended, social, dramatic and exploratory. Which is a pretty good way to conceive of language in a world in which, as David Miller puts it in Gods and Games, "the only thing that does not change is the appearance that all things change."

All this theoretical consistency is nice, of course, but it's quite obvious that any composition teacher who plays the role of artist will cause an awful lot of anxiety - - and we all know how our students are plenty anxious enough about writing as it is. So if we want our interactions with them to be less like interogations and more like conversations, we obviously need an antidote to the Teacher-as-Artist. And that-- at long last -- is where the title of presentation comes in: The Classroom-as-Playground. In general, it is a world where students can-- willingly and without paralyzing anxiety-- rehearse failure: the failure of their writing, the failure of their ideas. They need such a place -- as do we.

Let me return to Peckham for a moment. He notes that "man desires above all a predictable and ordered world, a world to which he is oriented, and this is the motivation behind the role of the scientist. But because man desires such a world so passionately, he is very much inclined to ignore anything that intimates that he does not have it. And to anything that disorients him, anything that requires him to experience cognitive tension, he ascribes negative value. Only in protected situations, characterized by high walls of psychic insulation, can he afford to let himself be aware of the disparity between his interests, that is, his expectancy or set or orientation, and the data his interaction with the environment actually produces."

Peckham applies these ideas to the world cohabitated by the artist and his audience. I like to apply them to the world of the composition classroom -- at least to one where the Teacher-as-Artist operates -- where I see the goal as being the creation of that "insulated environment" Peckham mentions, a kind of play-sphere which -- like the play-spheres characterized by play theorists such as Johann Huizinga, and Roger Callois -- has a disposition all its own.

Although it may be a place for rehearsal, this "playground" classroom -- because it <u>does</u> have a disposition all its own -- is <u>not</u> a microcosm of the so-called "real" world -- that world of hard knocks used by the Back-to-Basics movement (and its leading proponent, the Drill instructor) as a threat, a justification, and a model. Rather, as Callois puts it, the playground is "carefully

isolated form the rest of life"-- it is a "restricted, closed, protected universe." The "real" world, on the other hand, is a vast and unprotected realm of experience. It is unsettled and unsettling. It lacks the insulation provided by the play-sphere's temporal and spatial boundaries. This insulation is crucial, for because of it the player can proceed with his activities with a minimum of anxiety. Such activities are not "serious", in that they are "connected with no material interest." As Miller puts it, the "game points" in these actvities are "not quite as real or permanent, terrible, important, or logical as they seem." Finally, the play sphere, according to Callois, has no "fatal consequences," in that the player does not have to live indefinitely with the results of his behavior.

That is the ideal playground, the abstract model offered to us by the play-theorists. We more or less live in one here, at this convention, which is our classroom. We realize, of course, that back home any would-be Classroom-as-Playground can at best only approximate this ideal form. It will be an as-if environment, and the games played there will be (like most games, including language-games) "as-if" activities. It would be foolish to pretend otherwise.

But I like the metaphor anyway. I like what Professor Kingsfield of Paper Chase tries to do -- I just don't like the world he creates to do it in. So how might we do things differently? How might we go about creating a play-spirit classroom? You probably have as many ideas about that as I do, but I'll suggest a few that seem to work for me.

In general, of course, we want to soften --though not pretend to destroy-- those traditional structures and roles which conventionally define our interactions with our students. So we have to be what Walter Ong calls "personalists" -- we must run the personality contest our students will run for us anyway. The Teacher-as-Artist operates in the spirit of play anyway, so he might as well live the part fully.

I'd also recommend as much group-work as possible, with us staying out of it, so students can play the artist with each other. Also, we should deal primarily with student writing, not the "model-prose" of what to them are aliens. We might even make our <u>own</u> writing the focus of attention at times. I like to start doing this early: my first two in-class assignment sheets self-consciously create stereotyped <u>personae</u> of Teacher, and those are the first pieces of writing we look at in the course.

It's not a <u>big</u> point, but perhaps we should stop using syllabi. They aren't very playful, and it's impossible to keep to them anyway-- unless we let our non-artistic itch for closure get the best of us.

I also suggest digressing a lot; the "subject" of a composition class is student langauge-activity, and that can be focused on regardless of what's being talked about.

We should probably avoid assigning one-shot papers-- that is, stop patterning ourselves after the cold, cruel "outside" world. Instead, we should always ask for at least one revision, and do our

artist-like intervening at the draft stage only. (Go ahead and ignore without guilt those colleagues who assign 15 papers a semester, explaining themselves with some version of "you learn to write by writing").

Perhaps we should try assigning 2-part papers on the subject chosen by the student -- the first part a highly personal exploration, written in what James Britton calls the "Expressive Mode," and the second part as an as-if "public" piece of writing, one done primarily in the "transactional" mode. If we give these two-part assignments, most of our draft-stage commentary should be on the openly exploratory "personal" piece.

Another playground possibility is to isolate a statement from a student paper which we feel needs more exploration, and, through a disorienting question, ask the student to write a loose, "organization-punctuation-be-damned" journal entry about it.

Also, we could actually read their journals, and ask some questions to be explored in a follow-up entry. Carry on a conversation, that is.

Perhaps we might even have assigned papers grow out of each other. I can conceive of a course -- and one of my colleagues actually runs one -- which would consist of a single paper, ever-growing, reaching out in different directions, all modes of writing used.

A last suggestion: I don't think we should ever let a paper go by without asking the student to analyze -- in one form or another -- the self which wrote it: that is, the values and beliefs and assumptions and personality of the created persona.

Those are some possibilties. They often take time, but by doing these sorts of things we do what I think any writing course must do: expose the student-writer to tensions and problems created by his life and his language. Just as important: because there's a kind of looseness and open-endedness to such "playground" moves, they encourage in the student a particular orientation toward those problems and tensions -- an orientation which sets the Classroom-as-Playground apart from the workaday world. The "real world, the world of hard knocks, stresses solutions, products. The quality of the products is often of concern only when they prove in practice to be poorly-concieved, thoughtlessly-created. Then the consequences can be "fatal," sometimes literally.

In the Classroom-as-Playground, on the other hand, products are obviously far less important than the process of creating them. The products themselves are continually questioned anyway -- by the Teacher-as-Artist, eventually by the student. So they don't last long; but that's all right -- they aren't meant to last long. Solutions are not imperative in the play-sphere -- not in our classrooms, not at this convention. What is imperative is the process, the use of writing and talking, to continue searching.

And it's out of that constant, playful searching that skillful writers emerge. We don't build them; they evolve. The evolve out of, and because of circumstances -- circumstances over which we composition teachers have a lot of control (more control, I think than any group of teachers in the University -- which puts a lot of responsibility on us). Skillful writing is not something done by habit, or rote, or even chance. As Gilbert Ryle puts it, "A person's performance is described as careful or skillful, if in his operations he is ready to detect and correct lapses, to repeat and improve upon successes, to profit from the examples of others and so forth." Elsewhere Ryle suggests that "to be intelligent is not merely to satisfy criteria, but to apply them." If we want our student to evolve into intelligent, skillful writers, we obviously should avoid drill, the imposition of repetitions. Instead, what we need to rpovide -- again to use Ryle's words -- "the stimulation by criticism and example of the student's own judgement." The result of drill is the building up of habits -- unexamined and eventually unnoticed behavior. As a result of encountering the Teacher-as-Artist in the Classroom-as-Playground, however, a student "learns how to do things while thinking what he is doing, so that every operation he performs is itself a new lesson to him about how to perform better."

He learns, that is, to apply criteria as well as satisfy them. He learns, that is, to be intelligent. He also -- and here's where the Big Picture comes to into focus again -- he also learns to accept both the world and himself as a process, and is therefore better equipped to deal with the incessant process of change which makes up

the fabric of his existence. And since he can see himself as a process which is part of a larger process, he is stable. As David Miller puts it: "his stability is precisely in his ability to change."

Or as I would put it, such a student becomes a better person -- as we ourselves do by being an active part of the process. For that, no apologies are necessary. To return to John Fowles, and also to high-mindedness -- because here, at least, I can: "Means-oriented societies, for whom the game is the game. Ends-oriented societies, for whom the game is winning. In the first, if one is happy, then one is successful; in the second, one cannot be happy unless one is successful. The whole tendency of evolution and history suggests that man must become means-oriented if he is to survive."